

U.S. Embassy Bangkok
Virtual Town Hall Meeting for American Citizens
Tuesday, May 18, 2010 || 4:00-5:15pm

Embassy Moderator: Good afternoon everyone. Welcome. We have Ambassador John here who will begin with a few words.

Amb. John: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for our first virtual Town Hall meeting. I apologize for any inconvenience rescheduling and reformatting this event has caused. Although meeting face-to-face is ideal, this webchat will allow me and my team to reach a broader audience from the safety and security of their home or office.

Amb. John: Although, we only have a limited time for this session and will only be able to answer a fraction of your questions, I consider this an ongoing dialogue. We will post the transcript of today's Town Hall to the Embassy website (<http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>) and on our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/usembassybkk>), and we encourage you to pay attention to our warden messages and other public announcements for further updates. For those whose questions may not have been addressed today, we urge you to contact us at acsbkk@state.gov.

Amb. John: First, let me begin by saying that the United States deeply regrets the violence and loss of life that has resulted from clashes between security forces and protesters from the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD or "red-shirts"). We call on both sides to show restraint and work to resolve differences through Thailand's democratic institutions. We remain very concerned about the situation in Thailand and are closely monitoring events. We once again stress the importance of all players in Thailand working to resolve differences in a way that strengthens democracy and rule of law. Violence is not an acceptable means of resolving political differences.

Amb. John: Let me give you a snapshot of the current situation in Bangkok. (As a reminder, to keep current on events in Bangkok and Thailand, we encourage you to monitor local and international media.) As we can see from media reports, central Bangkok continues to experience violence with skirmishing and explosions continuing overnight and this morning in the Din Daeng area and along Rama 4 east of Sathorn Road. While we note that overnight clashes appeared to occur at a less intense level than over the weekend, the situation remains volatile with violence continuing.

Amb. John: Reports overnight indicate that supporters of the red-shirts attempted to set up protest sites in Hua Mak at Ramkhamhaeng University, in the Nang Lerng area; at Victory Monument in front of Center One Department Store; and in front of the Imperial Department Store at Lat Phrao. We have also seen reports that there representatives of the government and from the protesters continue to explore a negotiated resolution to the conflict and we encourage these efforts.

Amb. John: Our primary concern is the safety and security of Americans residing and travelling through Thailand. We are keenly aware that this is your Embassy, and we want to provide you

with the best quality of service. We have a lot of questions about American Citizens Services, visa processing and security issues, so let's get right to those.

Embassy Moderator: Today, we also have with us our American Citizen Services Chief, Regional Security Officer and Regional Psychiatrist.

Andy Miller: The State Department this week authorized non-emergency employees and family member to leave Bangkok. Is this to leave the country or just to leave Bangkok? Also, is this a move that we as U.S. citizens should follow?

ACS Chief: Thank you for your question Mr. Miller- The U.S. Embassy has decided, in light of the current situation, to go to authorized voluntary departure only for eligible family members in Bangkok, to return to their permanent home location. Employees of the Embassy will remain in place. The decision for a private U.S. citizen to stay in Thailand is solely up to that individual's discretion, however U.S. citizens currently in Bangkok are urged to avoid travel to and lodging in and around the demonstration areas, including the U.S. Embassy.

Cyrus: In the last meeting you guys made it clear that things were pretty safe out here. Why then are so many embassies (including ours) evacuating staff and closing offices? This behavior causes us to worry that you more informed people may know more about the likelihood of prolonged, increased violence than we do. Do you?

RSO Randall Bennett: In the recent meeting, we made it clear that this situation was fluid and could and probably would change, but with hope for the best. The Army is now trying to get the city back open and it has involved responding to violence instigated by the Red-Shirts. We are not evacuating our Embassy. We have simply made a voluntary option available for [family members]. Offices are closed due to the violence in this neighborhood and our desire to protect those who might come here for services. Our advice to you remains a view to caution but not panic.

Dave Kaufman: Hi, All of us are watching the deadly riots in Bangkok and hoping that these problems get solved quickly. We are scheduled to come to Bangkok (from Phuket) so we can get our required services done at the Embassy on 24 May. Are there any contingency plans for US Citizens to obtain necessary services (e.g. new passports, notary, etc..)? For example, will you folks deploy to another location in Bangkok or come to one of the regions (e.g. Pattaya or Phuket) so vital service may be obtained? Please advise. Sincerely, David Kaufman

ACS Chief: Thank you for your question, Mr. Kaufman. We have been working around the clock to set up a temporary location to provide emergency and limited routine Consular Services to U.S. Citizens, starting tomorrow. For anyone interested, our American Citizen Services unit will be at the Westin Grand Hotel, which is located at 259 Sukhumvit Road. Hours will be 8am-noon. We will be processing applications for passports (emergency and regular) and Consular Reports of Birth Abroad (CRBAs by appointment only). We will also be providing notarial services (e.g., income affidavits). We encourage everyone to make an appointment, which should be done on our website. Those who have appointments will be given priority and seen on the day of their appointment.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Welcome everyone, there are several hundred of us online today. The team is now working hard to answer as many of your questions as possible. Please bear with us as we start the q/a process. The flow of answers will speed up as we continue the session. Also, a transcript will be available following the chat session so if you need to log off, please visit the Embassy website for a recap.

Ute in Thailand: Should the situation continue to deteriorate will the Embassy issue any type of advisory specific to evacuation, either from specific areas of Bangkok or the country at large?

ACS Chief: We know that many of you have had appointments cancelled due to the Embassy closure. We are terribly sorry, but hope you can understand the very serious security reasons for this. Those who had appointments on Friday (May 15), Monday (May 17) and today Tuesday (May 18) will be given priority, in the order of their original appointment. Those without appointments will be seen on a first-come, first-served basis. We will be doing our best to accommodate those without appointments, but we cannot guarantee that services will necessarily be available to those without appointment. We thank you in advance for your patience, but hope that this will help many of you who need assistance.

Peppy: At what point would you ask all American living and working in Bangkok to leave. Any information on a contingency plan for US citizens would be helpful. Thank you.

ACS Chief: Dear Ute- The security situation remains fluid and dynamic. The Embassy has closed not because of a threat to the Embassy [in particular], but rather as a result of routes to/from the Embassy becoming difficult to travel on.

Ronald R Grant: I am US national living long time in Thailand. Recently, my father passed away in USA. My wife is Thai- we never apply for "green card" because our life is here in Thailand. We need to go to USA to for my father's funeral service. My wife has never been to USA, so she needs her first visitor visa. Her appointment is 1 June, our flight 9 June. I worry that with all the trouble US Bangkok embassy may not be able to keep the appointment, and if my wife does not make the trip, it will be big disappointment to many- especially my elderly mother. As wife of US citizen and US taxpayer- seems we should have some type of "special treatment" and not be bundled with any and all first time visitor visa applicants. If the US Embassy can not keep the 1 June appointment- can any special provision for us to fly to Chiang Mai and have the appointment there? Also, I see that she must go to this appointment by herself? As a spouse of US citizen and also taxpayer, this does not seem too fair that I am not allowed to attend her in

ACS Chief: Thank you for your question, Mr. Grant. June 1st is still quite a while away, but we completely understand your concern. Depending on capacity there, you may be able to email our Consulate in Chiang Mai at acschn@state.gov to request an appointment. Please explain your circumstances; they will then let you know immediately whether they can accept your wife for an appointment in Chiang Mai.

jem40000: Please any information re: Suvarnabhumi airport?

RSO Randall Bennett: The International Airport is open and fully functional with no reason at this time to anticipate any change.

Dr. Marcia Meckler: Let me step in for a moment...The most important thing I would like to convey is for folks to remember to take care of themselves during this very stressful and unsettled time. It is important for people to do those things which increase their resilience because then they will be in the best place for making good decisions and helping the people they care about. And what that means is making sure that make sure you eat nutritious food, try to get adequate sleep, exercise, stay in touch with friends and family, and maintain your routines as much as possible. This last point is particular important for those of us with children. They will look to you to make sense of what is going on around them. Maintaining usual routines will be reassuring to them.

Alexander: If citizens need to be evacuated from Thailand, how will the embassy handled that?

RSO Randall Bennett: It is not anticipated that mandatory evacuation will become a realistic consideration for Thailand. Were it to become a real issue, plans are in place as they are for every Embassy in the world and all American citizens would be guided step by step. Be sure you are part of the Warden System.

Dr. Marcia Meckler: I want to mention one other point. Particularly for those with children, it is important to limit the amount of news they are exposed to with scenes of violence and distress. Watching images over and over again of conflict and violence is traumatic. Consider using the internet to get news and information, that way you can control what images you see and stories you read and the rate of the information flow, rather than being at the mercy of the television news cycle. Try not to stay continuously connected looking for updates; check in for limited amounts of time and then try to refocus on productive activities you can accomplish.

aaprime: Has the security situation improved or gotten worse over the last 24 hours?

RSO Randall Bennett: It seems to go through peaks and valleys day to day but we believe that there are signs of improvement. The unfortunate part of regaining control of the economic zone is that violence seems to be part of the process since negotiation has failed several times.

James: As a retired Foreign Service Officer I believe you may have given the wrong impression to US Citizens at the last town hall. You indicated that you have your "warden network" to contact individuals and neighborhoods. But this is strictly for the US Embassy staff. You have no information on the whereabouts of US citizens or any way to contact them outside of e-mail. Do you have any other ways to contact us aside from email and alerting radio stations etc?

ACS Chief: James, there are about 20,000 Americans registered with the U.S. Embassy in what we call the "warden network". All those who are registered with us receive email updates when applicable. In addition, there are also currently about 30 private Americans living throughout Thailand that serve as volunteer wardens for the American community. This warden system serves all Americans in Thailand, in the event that they are needed. For example, if needed, we go to them and they may even go door to door to get a message out. To become part of this "warden" system, please register with the Embassy, which you can do through our

website.

Anand Rao: i heard that there was a likely resolution in sight within 48 hours. Is this true?

Tom Ricciardi: I have an appointment tomorrow at Westin Grande to present an I-130 for my Thai wife of three years- Are you coordinating these issues with Homeland security so as to accelerate the process for folks in our shoes?

Amb. John: There are a lot of rumors out there about when this will end, but, to be honest, I don't think anyone knows. We at the Embassy are doing our utmost to talk to all sides to try to ensure that Thais can resolve this as peacefully as possible and as soon as possible. We aren't mediating, but encouraging dialogue as the solution, not violence.

anna Pietrowski: At what point should American citizens residing in or around Bangkok leave the area and return to the States?

Kim Cofino: Don't have a question, just want to say how much I appreciate the Embassy offering this service. Thank you!

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Hello Kim, thank you for your comments. Just so everyone is aware, there are now more than 500 of you logged in. The team is working to answer as many questions as possible.

ACS Chief: Dear Tom, Unfortunately, we are not able to offer any visa services at the Westin Grande. We are currently working hard to reopen our visa services, but much of this will be dictated by the security situation. We understand your concerns and are doing everything we can to move forward on this.

David R. King: You're doing a great job. Thank you for giving meaning again to the term "public servant". Well done!!

RSO Randall Bennett: Anna, the decision to leave Bangkok needs to be a personal one. At this time, if you live outside the "Red Zone", it is not considered to be necessary but it all comes down to one's own comfort zone.

Leo B.: why is the response so slow?

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Hi Leo, the team of four including the Ambassador must sift through now hundreds and hundreds of questions. The team is then typing out each answer, it does take time but the answers are coming. Also, there will be a transcript so if you need to log out for a bit please check back later to view the entire discussion.

Gary: A few questions: I would like to travel around the north of the country. Are there areas that are hostile to Americans?

RSO Randall Bennett: No one in Thailand, whether north central or south is hostile to Americans. We have a very friendly relationship.

aishamc: I agree with Kim and David, the embassy is doing a wonderful job dealing with the situation

Claudia Krisnaraja: If we has Americans join as one to understand, it seems so sad that the Thai side is full of anger. I hope you continue to keep us connected and it is my pleasure to be a part of this community! Thank you.

drew noyes: We just tried to reschedule a visa appointment and a Report of Birth Abroad on the website. It says we have to wait until after the 21st to try again. Many Americans in Pattaya have made appointments for visa service for relatives and consular services for themselves. These appointments were cancelled by the embassy. They are unable to reach anyone by phone and unable to reschedule appointments via the website. How can these appointments be rescheduled?

ACS Chief: Drew, the visa section is contacting applicants whose interviews were cancelled as a result of the ongoing situation. They are contacting them by email and/or phone. Please continue to monitor the visas page on the U.S. Embassy website for further details and updates. As for American Citizen Services, appointments can now be made online for services at our offsite location. The highest demand right now is for Consular Reports of Birth Abroad, so it may be difficult to book an appointment this week. We know that the cancellations this week have been disruptive for everyone, but we appreciate your understanding.

Rich N: Dr. Marcia Meckler: Thank you for that information, My 5 year old son is starting to ask why he cant go to school this week.

Dr. Marcia Meckler: Even though he is not in school this week, if you can help him maintain as much as possible his usual routine, he will find that reassuring. He may not yet be able to articulate his worries or concerns, so his distress might come out in behavior. It is not unusual for kids to regress in stressful situations. Letting him know that he is safe and that you are there will be reassuring.

Lawrence: We are getting reports of US citizens who are trapped in apartments and running short of food, medications. Can you do anything to get the local Red Cross to help them evacuate if you get word of their locations?

RSO Randall Bennett: We do not know of American citizens currently trapped in apartments or running short of supplies. There was one case and she was removed and moved to a hotel. It is possible to move out if one desires.

Rich N: Dr. Marcia Meckler: Thank you .

ACS Chief: We have a lot of people [asking questions] like these: I am an American citizen with a baby born in Thailand who has an American passport. My wife is Thai and who is on a

Thai passport. Is it possible due to the political situation and if my daughter and I come back to America for my wife to be accepted into our country on an asylum status or is there another way I can get her into America? We do not want to pull the family apart.

ACS Chief: First of all, congratulations on the new addition to your family. We understand your concerns about your family. If she has a valid visa, your wife can travel using the visa, provided that her purpose of travel is consistent with the visa classification. If she does not have one already, your wife will need a visa to board the plane and to enter the United States. Our Visa Unit is currently closed for the remainder of the week because of the security situation and we hope to re-open visa processing as soon as possible.

tomio nishimura: Whatt will need to happen before all US citizens are ordered to evacuate the country, and what is the likelihood of this occurring?

RSO Randall Bennett: Before an ordered departure would be called for, there would have to be a complete break-down of the government controls and a true threat to the citizen population. It is extremely unlikely to occur.

maja 2: before i run out of time, I also would like to tell you all at the embassy - thank you for doing such a great job. makes me feel confident I have an embassy that cares.

NatalieRung: I hope ya'll are correct about it being confined to one area!! I am coming to Thailand in 6 days with my Thai in-laws and I am quite nervous!

Amb. John: Hi. We are not claiming that these protests are going to be confined to one area now, or in the future. We have advised Americans to avoid coming to Bangkok, and avoid nonessential travel to the rest of Thailand. I don't know where you will be visiting six days from now, but you need to keep abreast of the news to know what areas to avoid. Thanks for the question.

MarkinSakao: Can American Citizen Services arrange a consular outreach in Pattaya or elsewhere, at least one day a week until situation stabilizes?

ACS Chief: Unfortunately, we currently need all of our staff here in Bangkok to assist with American Citizen Services emergencies, especially since we are opening our offsite location in Bangkok tomorrow morning. For more details on the offsite location, please see our website. Once our operations return to normal, we hope to be able to resume regular consular outreach activities.

carlfromsouthdakota 2: wil getting an affidavit for marriage be covered in the servicest at your temporary location at the Westin this week?

ACS Chief: Yes, we will be providing notarial services at our offsite location. Please just make sure you make an appointment, which you can do online.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Quick update everyone. As of right now, more than 1000 participants have been through today's webchat "room". The volume of questions is very high. The team, led by the Ambassador, is working as quickly as possible to get answers to you.

EXPAT 1: SINCE EMBASSY NON-ESSENTIALS ARE BEING PERMITTED TO BE EVAC'D, WHAT IS THE BASIC GAME PLAN FOR US 20,000 US CIVILIANS WHO ARE NOT ASSOCIATED WITH THE EMBASSY? IF THAILAND GOES BESERK, WHAT IS THE PLAN TO EVAC' THE REST OF US?

RSO Randall Bennett: All U.S. Embassies in the world have Emergency Action Plans that include detailed operational plans for evacuation of all American citizens in that country. That is why we have the Warden System to maintain a current list of the 20,000-plus people we are responsible for. It is not anticipated to become a real issue but the plan is there and you should make sure you are part of the Warden System.

ScottW: The embassy has to walk a fine line of saying things to inform/protect US citizens while at the same time not spooking investors or angering the Thais. Can we trust "the system" to err on the side of keeping people safe?

Amb. John: Scott, let me take this opportunity to assure you that the highest priority of this Embassy is to take care of the welfare of our American citizens.

Robert Bisighini: mY PASSPORT IS IN THE eBASSY, i WAS GETTING PAGES ADDED HOW CAN i GET IT SO i CAN GET OUT OF COUNTRY?

ACS Chief: Dear Robert, please email acsbkk@state.gov with your case specifics. We should be able to bring it with us and you can pick it up at the Westin.

guest 4: What is the best course of action for a US citizen if confronted with a sudden altercation that arises from a political disagreement?

RSO Randall Bennett: We strongly encourage you to avoid areas of large crowds and possible confrontation and if it comes as a surprise, you should walk away. It is never worth it to fight over a political stance or perspective.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Looks like we've been bumped from the network a couple of times here. We are continuing with the session.

Embassy Bangkok Moderator: Due to the high volume of questions, we are going to go a bit longer. We appreciate your patience and will do our best to answer as many questions as possible. Thank you all.

f.u. morita: I live in Sukhumvit 24, near Emporium. Should I move out of the area since there is another red shirt stage at the intersection of Klongteoy.

RSO Randall Bennett: At this point, we have Embassy Officers who are in that vicinity and we do not see any reason to move out at this time.

G. Hazel: Is there any where on your web site that explains this warden system alittle better. If things go south fast I'd like to be assured that my family and I will be contacted to head to "hills". I am a retired govt employee from DC and I know how "things get slipped through the cracks sometimes".

ACS Chief: There have been several questions about the "warden system". This basically refers to the system through which American citizens register with the Embassy. To register, go online to <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs>. Make sure you put in an email address so that you will receive any "warden messages" or announcements that we send out. In the event of an emergency, the Embassy will provide information and other critical assistance to American citizens.

ACS Chief: Registration is the only way to guarantee that the Embassy is aware of your presence in the country and is able to contact you and assist you in such circumstances. The registration system allows you to register and update your contact information on the Internet at any time, making it easier for you to keep your information current. The site also provides you with up-to-date travel information customized to your unique travel agenda and itinerary.

Michael Grimes 2: warden system registration here
<http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/embassy/acsregform.htm>

ACS Chief: Thanks Michael. We encourage people to visit this site.

Don Beckerman: I am registered with the embassy. How do I register to become part of the warden system?

ACS Chief: Dear Don, it's the same thing. If you are already registered, you're already part of the warden system. Thanks for registering!

michelle: what is the travel advice concerning the rest of thailand?

ACS Chief: We are currently advising Americans to defer non-essential travel to Thailand and ALL travel to Bangkok.

Dr. Marcia Meckler: Here's a resource site...It's a link to the American Psychological Association's website on stress. Some folks might find some helpful info there.
<http://www.apa.org/topics/stress/index.aspx>

Nancy Ritnimit: You have calmed my heart; I am proud to be an American!

Libby Hadzima: The US Embassy seems to be saying that we should remain vigilant, connected to the news and calm during this. I would imagine many US Citizens, myself

included, are looking to the Embassy for signs that we should be re-evaluating remaining in Bangkok while also taking into account our own situations. Can we be assured that the Ambassador and high staff in the US Embassy are currently in Bangkok and have no left as you have been advising us to do?

Amb. John: Libby: I'm still here, and so are my wife and kids! Whenever we change the status of what we are doing with Embassy personnel or family here in Thailand, we inform the American public at the same time, so that we don't have a double standard of sharing information. Good question!

Dane: My question was apparently ignored: Is there any anticipated involvement of the US military in a peace-keeping capacity?

Amb. John: Dane, in response to your question - No.

Sarah: ALL travel to Bangkok, but what about those Americans who LIVE here...should be leave as well?

ACS Chief: Sarah, I refer you to the comments made earlier by my colleague, Randall, our Security Officer. The choice of whether to stay or depart is a matter of personal choice. We will continue to provide the best information that we can.

Dr. Marcia Meckler: Here's another link with helpful info for parents. It's from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry - <http://www.aacap.org/cs/DisasterTrauma.ResourceCenter>

David M:Ute in Thailand: Should the situation continue to deteriorate will the Embassy issue any type of advisory specific to evacuation, either from specific areas of Bangkok or the country at large?

RSO Randall Bennett: Yes, any change in conditions will be reported through the various Embassy communications and posted to the web-sites and travel advisories.

Allan Finkelstein: I registered when I arrived in Bangkok 8 years ago.. I can't recall ever receiving a message from the system!

ACS Chief: Alan, the system has changed since then. Please go to our website and register again (and make sure you add your email).

Sarah: Thank you ACS Chief for replying

JK: I previously submitted a question offline regarding need to add pages prior to my departure next week. Is there any possible way to achieve this or will I just have to wait and see

ACS Chief: JK, you can have this done at our offsite location. It will take longer than normal--at least 24 hours--but you can get it done. Please go online and make an appointment. We'll do our best to help.

Embassy Bangkok Moderator: We're going to have to wrap up here shortly. About another 5 minutes. We want to thank everyone for joining us today. Just a reminder, we will post a transcript of this virtual Town Hall to our website (<http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>) and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/usembassybkk>).

Scott Gannon: I just clicked on the link for the website you gave above to register, <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs>, and got a message saying 'page cannot be found'.

ACS Chief: Try linking it from our website. Also, if there are too many people trying at once, it might overload the system. I'll contact the IT people and make sure the site is up.

ACS Chief: I just went to the link: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/> and it worked. Please try again.

maja: thank you

John Eric Conger: Well Done!

j: This has been excellent. Thanks!

Brook: Yes, Thanks!

Jim Arledge: Thanks

Joeymcjobenstein: This "online town hall meeting" is great and a wonderful safe Idea thank you . I am going to the site to register my self as I believe I did before but I am unsure as I dont receive any emails or anything.

Methai 2: kohb kuhn kawp - thank you!

Embassy Bangkok Moderator: That is about all the time we have for now. We will be signing off soon.

Jirada Ch: Thank you ACS. This is excellent

Joeymcjobenstein: THANK YOU EMBASSY MODERATOR.

Amb. John: I want to thank you all for joining me and members of my Embassy team here today for this virtual Town Hall meeting. We had many more questions posed than we could answer during this session. If you had a specific question or concern that we were not able to

address today, we encourage you to contact us at acsbkk@state.gov. We understand that the situation in Thailand right now is a difficult one for you and your families. The Embassy seeks to provide the highest quality of service possible, and stand ready to assist you with your needs. Thank you again for joining us.

Bernard Servello: Thank you kindly

Gene P: thank you very much and well done!

Don: Thanks.

ScottW: Yes, thanks

Pawel: Thank You!

William Benedict 2: Thank you very much

ed 3: this was a wicked good idea so thanks for that! Emb. John, i have some vidz of you on stage jammin' jazz from about a year ago if ya'd like the copies hit me back. but come hell or high water i'm stayin here in bkk as i can't afford the chemo treatments back home! thanks again for this foun

Embassy Bangkok Moderator: Thank you all. This ends today's virtual Town Hall.

karen woolis: Thank you. Maybe audio next time?

Pawel: Its ending

bangkok US citizen: Thank you!

j 3: One of the best uses of my tax dollars. Thanks again!

Susan: sounds like this helped calm a lot of people's fears